New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1956

Volume XVII, Number 8 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of April 2, 1956

1956 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1955 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
*Bus Stop	346
*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof	342
Chalk Garden (The)	227
*Damn Yankees	310
*Desk Set (The)	234
*Diary of Anne Frank (The)	257
*Hatful of Rain (A)	213
*Inherit the Wind	322
*Janus	201
*Lark (The)	206
*Matchmaker (The)	194
*No Time for Sergeants	238
*Pipe Dream	198
Plain and Fancy	382
Red Roses for Me	183
Righteous Are Bold (The)	186
*Silk Stockings	354
Six Characters in Search of an Author	189
*Tiger at the Gates	264
View From the Bridge (A)	272
*Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?	246

•

1954 Vol.

*Fanny	256
*Pajama Game (The)	324
*Witness for the Prosecution	216

•

1953 Vol.

Teahouse of the August Moon (The)	254

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of April 2, 1956*

1956 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1956

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Debut	350
Fallen Angels	389
*Great Sebastians (The)	397
Hot Corner (The)	378
Innkeepers (The)	373
King Lear	394
Little Glass Clock	335
*Middle of the Night	370
Miss Julie	353
*Mister Johnson	332
*Mr. Wonderful	339
*My Fair Lady	345
*Ponder Heart (The)	358
Someone Waiting	365
Streetcar Named Desire (A)	362
Stronger (The)	353
Tamburlaine the Great	386
*Time Limit!	381

Theatre Openings

"Mr. Wonderful" "Mister Johnson"
"Little Glass Clock"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of April 2, 1956*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

All Reviews copyrighted by the newspapers and reproduced by permission.

Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Mister Johnson"

New York Post

March 30, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Portrait of a Man of Good Will

"Mister Johnson" is a strange, disturbing and curiously haunting play; a tragedy done almost entirely in terms of rather whimsical comedy. Sometimes it seems on the verge of suggesting "The Teahouse of the August Moon" with an African setting; on other occasions it verges in the direction of "The Emperor Jones." But always it has an original quality of its own, an odd mixture of the comic, the fantastic, the pathetic and the ruefully bitter, and, while there is no doubt that it flounders and sags dangerously, I found it, in the end, both upsetting and inescapably moving.

It is essentially more of a portrait than a play, and here Norman Rosten's dramatization of Joyce Cary's novel, which opened last night at the Martin Beck Theater, is immensely fortunate in its casting. For the all-important central role is played by the young Negro actor named Earle Hyman, who made a favorable off-Broadway impression in "Othello" several seasons ago, and Mr. Hyman, in a part that dominates the evening and appears in virtually every scene, gives a beautiful performance, which is at the same time warmly humorous and has the quality of tragic dignity.

Man in a Trap

"Mister Johnson," for all its trappings of comedy, is basically the tragedy of a good man trapped between two civilizations that fail to understand him. A Nigerian native employed by the British civil service, he has dreams of himself as an Englishman and a Christian. He has lost his status as the member of a primitive world without quite gaining the standards of European civilization, and he is misunderstood, patronized or mocked by the world he has lost and that which he has striven to achieve. Caught between them, he is hopelessly doomed.

At first, his efforts to find his place seem comic. He loves and wants to marry a native girl, and her parents make sport of him and prey upon him. His work for the British government causes him to be liked by a well-intentioned English official, but his method of getting things done inevitably causes him to get into trouble, even when he manages to get a road built that could have been constructed by no other means. Discharged by the official he cherished as a friend and deprived of his wife, he is driven to commit murder that he never understood or intended.

Portrait and Story

Thanks in great part to Mr. Hyman's superb performance, the portrait of the bewildered and entrapped man of good will and imagination is completely successful. But the narrative of his fall is far less happy. At times, it seems confused and a little obscure in the telling. The building of the road hints too closely of "The Teahouse of the August Moon." Although there is a fine scene between the native wife and the bride of the colonial official, the episodes in which poor Johnson is not present tend to lag. Some of the play's central portion seems a little dawdling.

The production is excellent. Robert Lewis has staged it with skill and imagination, and the sets and costumes by the Eckarts are rich in atmospheric color. There is a splendid performance by Josephine Premice as the tribal wife, and John Akar is excellent as Johnson's one Nigerian friend. There are satisfactory portrayals by William Sylvester as the friendly colonial official, Gaby Rodgers as his wife, Lawrence Fletcher as a less sympathetic official, and Thayer David as a British trader. "Mister Johnson" certainly has its frailties, but Mr. Hyman's characterization is so moving and real that they seem comparatively unimportant.

"MISTER JOHNSON"

Play by Norman Rosten; based on the novel by Joyce Cary; staged by Robert Lewis; settings, costumes and lighting by William and Jean Eckart; presented by Cheryl Crawford and Mr. Lewis at the Martin Beck Theatre, March 29, 1956. The cast:

Mister Johnson	Earle Hyman
Bamu	Josephine Premice
Aliu	James E. Wall
Ajali	Broc Peters
Benjamin	John Akar
Matumbi	Rosetta Le Noire
Gollup	Thayer David
Bulteel	Lawrence Fletcher
Adamu	Charles McRae
Audu	Rai Saunders
Moma	Earl Jones
Rudbeck	William Sylvester
Brimah	Milton J. Williams
2nd Brother	La Verne French
Uncle	David Berahzer
Girl	Margie James
Mother	Ruth Attaway
Policeman	Clayton Corbin
Saleh	Philip Hepburn
Waziri	Jay Riley
Isa	Harold Nurse
Celia	Gaby Rodgers
Chief	Percival Borde
Petitioner	Curtis James

The New York Times

March 30, 1956

Theatre: Fabulous 'Mister Johnson'

Joyce Cary's Novel Is Adapted to Stage

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH "Mister Johnson," which opened at the Martin Beck last evening, has come out of a novel, it has not gotten all the way into the theatre.

That negative comment is printed here unwillingly. For there is a lot of interesting stuff in "Mister Johnson," and parts of it are moving, too. Using Joyce Cary's novel as his source-book, Norman Rosten has written a picaresque drama about a fabulous Negro clerk in a small town in Nigeria.

•

Mister Johnson, as everyone calls him, is a joyous, good-intentioned Government clerk who tries very hard to follow an austere British pattern. But happiness is always breaking in. He gets into debt buying himself a wife from a bush family. He puts the Government into debt building a road that is not authorized. He grafts a little on the road. In the excitement of stealing some gin for a celebration, he accidentally kills a white storekeeper. Even the British civil servant who loves him cannot rescue him from the law in the end.

As a rambling portrait of the African bush, "Mister Johnson" is a much more colorful drama than the story suggests. For Robert Lewis, who staged "The Teahouse of the August Moon," has staged it against expansive and beautifully lighted scenery by William and Jean Eckart and with some brilliantly organized tribal dances to the accompaniment of baleful-sounding drums.

And the leading part is wonderfully well acted by Earle Hyman, a gifted Negro actor who at last has inherited a Broadway part worthy of his talents. Mr. Hyman is a tall, supple, imaginative actor. As a happy, impulsive Government clerk who is drawn between loyalty to British system and native irresponsibility, Mr. Hyman is superb.

•

In view of the original and enlightening things that "Mister Johnson" contains, it is difficult to account for the fact that it does not come into sharp focus and make a single impression. Perhaps it has not pulled sufficiently loose from the novel. It is crowded with details that are not really significant. It contains so many aspects of life in the bush that it never quite finishes any of them.

It keeps shifting emphasis from the foibles of Mister Johnson to the temperamental irritations of the white man's life, to the tribal customs of marriage, the frustrations of office bureaucracy, the problems of road-building, the pitiless severity of British law.

All of them are individually absorbing. But "Mister Johnson" gives a final impression of not having a theme. Mister Johnson himself contains the tragic paradox of a civilization. He tries to do the white man's job according to the rules. But the exuberance of his nature leads him astray.

The white man cannot build the road by the rules. But Mister Johnson does build it by mixing the rules with his native genius for improvisation. The white man ought to thank him. But the white man fires him and Mister Johnson plunges into temperamental disaster. Perhaps that is the underlying theme of "Mister Johnson." If so, it is frittered away in a mass of alluring but irrelevant details.

In addition to Mr. Hyman, the cast includes several other excellent actors—Gaby Rodgers as a highly amusing, deftly comic wife to the local British civil servant; Josephine Premice as a shrewd, coy girl of the bush who knows how to bilk her betters; William Sylvester as the unhappy representative of the British; Thayer David as an amusingly squalid white storekeeper; Lawrence Fletcher as the testy district manger, and many others.

There is a lot of original material and theatre work in "Mister Johnson." But the parts are keener than the whole.

DAILY NEWS
March 30, 1956

'Mister Johnson' a Touching Play, Beautifully Acted and Directed

By JOHN CHAPMAN

From a novel by Joyce Cary, "Mister Johnson," Norman Rosten has written a lovely, touching play, and it was given a beautiful production last evening at the Martin Beck Theatre.

The story concerns a West African Negro lad who has risen to the exalted post of clerk in a British Government colonial outpost in Nigeria. This boy, filled with dauntless enthusiasm, has adopted such occidental traits as Christianity, efficiency and ambition . . . and has possessed himself of a pair of shiny black shoes which he wears strung over his neck like a necklace. Like Lenny, in John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," he is a guileless soul, and for being guileless he must be put away with a shot in the back, just the way Lenny was.

Hyman Carries It

The principal players in "Mister Johnson" are splendid—Earle Hyman as the young African and William Sylvester as the British minor bureaucrat who is forced, by the rules of human comedy, to put his clerk away in a heartbreaking final scene. It is, mostly, Hyman's play, for the role is a long and hard one—and Hyman doesn't falter. This is good acting.

Physically, the production is admirable. William and Jean Eckart have designed and lighted a simple setting which permits the drama to move quickly from here to there, as a novel would. Robert Lewis has staged "Mister Johnson" with extreme care and great good judgment. With the aid of Pearl Primus, he has evoked some exciting interludes of African song and dance—but he never allows spectacle to interfere with the pitiful story of Mister Johnson.

Too Much Civilization

Johnson has embraced with innocence and joy the principles of his white masters. When he falls in love with a girl named Bamu (skillfully and sardonically played by Josephine Premice) he insists on a Christian ceremony, oath, ring and all. As a clerk he is intelligent and willing—so willing, in fact, that he borrows from one government fund he shouldn't touch in order to complete a road through the jungle which will bring prosperity and happiness to his village.

For this borrowing Mister Johnson is sacked. He is a proud lad, and the disgrace is too much for him. In his desperate attempts to keep his head held high, he gets involved in many minor troubles and finally the big one—a murder.

This is an unusual drama, and a disturbing one. There are many good actors in a big cast, including Gaby Rodgers, Lawrence Fletcher, Thayer David and John Akar, but the ones to watch are the pair who carry the burden of the drama — Sylvester and Hyman. They couldn't be better, and "Mister Johnson" is an absorbing play.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 30, 1956

THEATER

'Mister Johnson'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE mercurial qualities of Joyce Cary's hero, the irrepressible and hopelessly doomed Mr. Johnson, are perfectly caught in the closing scenes of the new play at the Martin Beck.

Johnson has, in a frenzy of drunken bewilderment, killed the British storekeeper in a West African colony. As he stands, bitterly penitent, before the administrator who has always befriended him and who now must take his final statement, he is still the quickly joyous soul he has been from the beginning. He wrings his hands in shame, chokes back sobs as he confesses to a "good" man the evil thing he has done. But with the faintest sign of charity from his interrogator he is suddenly in the clouds once more, bubbling over with love of the world and gratitude to mankind, foolishly and tragically gay at the thought of a reprieve that will never come. The lightning-like transformation from abject despair to uncomprehending jubilation is a stunning study in character.

Indeed, in actor Earle Hyman's hand's Mr. Johnson is sunny, ingratiating, and strangely touching throughout the play. Mr. Hyman has an enormous emotional range: from the simple pleasure he takes in staring possessively at "the most beautiful girl in the whole world" to the extraordinarily complex anguish in which he says farewell to his beloved trees and, in the same moment, asks his personal hero to shoot him, the stinging contrasts between what is primitive in Johnson and what is wistfully civilized in Johnson are made brilliantly clear.

When Mr. Hyman is imagining how hard the poor King of England works in his busy castle, the storybook dreams of a tribal people come into colorful focus. And when he is delightedly explaining to a superior how the official "books" can be doctored, or pleading with his wife to try on a ladylike dress, the crude claims of another "culture" are thrown into sharp, ironic relief. That the well-meaning Johnson should die of this puzzling clash in values is always believable.

* * *

And the staging that Robert Lewis has provided for Norman Rosten's dramatization is always pictorially brilliant. A jungle cartoon in which a savage family strip Johnson of his umbrella, wristwatch and shirt is gleefully managed. A composition in which native drummers stand in odd balance to a newly-arrived, daintily-frocked Englishwoman is enormously evocative. And, with the help of choreographer Pearl Primus, Mr. Lewis has hurled a wedding-night ritual, a road-building dance of machetes and a dozen other vigorous visual embellishments into the unfolding tangle of the story.

* * *

Every moment of Cheryl Crawford's production is to be respected. If the sum of the moments, and even of those very moving final vignettes, is something less than a full-bodied play, it may be because of a curious dramatic shorthand that Mr. Rosten has applied to the Cary novel. Fragmentary scenes are clipped skillfully from its entire panorama; but they tend to remain pieces of construction rather than a rising, rolling, cumulative and inevitable single narrative.

I suspect that Mr. Rosten is often in too much of a hurry. Again and again he picks us up late in a scene—the murder of the storekeeper is almost without preparation, Johnson's enchantment with his lady-love is complete before the curtain has gone up—and we are denied the slow intimacy and the increasing dramatic power a more sustained development might have given us. We are cheated, too, of some of the story's most significant moments: the theft-by-night of a government paper, for instance, or the flight of Johnson's wife. A more patient dramaturgy might have gripped us faster and held us more firmly.

All this in spite of some first-rate supporting performances. William Sylvester's superintendent, with a passion for road-building and an intuitive sympathy for his unreliable clerk, is a crisp, shrewd, wonderfully understanding portrait. Gaby Rodgers' pathetically refined, pathetically cheerful Londoner is precise and telling comment on the half-civilized scene. Josephine Premice's grasping but finally tender wife, Thayer David's amiably sadistic storekeeper, Lawrence Fletcher's stern apostle of "red-tape" are all sharply and intelligently defined.

"Mr. Johnson" plays fair with its source material every step of the way. It is, however, a compilation of striking episodes rather than a headlong play; it cannot ever quite escape that "scenes-from" feeling.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 30, 1956

'Mister Johnson' At Martin Beck

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Mister Johnson" at the Martin Beck has in it one of the most astonishing imaginative creations of modern theater. It is the title role as played with magical insight, variety and sensitiveness by Earle Hyman.

This central figure is a young African native, whose charm and imagination win him a job as government clerk. His virtues are cleanly balanced by his waywardness. Flair leaves him little time for ordinary morality. What's money?

The play has one of the theater's sweetest love stories, too. Mr. Johnson buys a lovely native bride, then all but breaks his heart trying to "civilize" her. Great pagan ballets signal his failure.

Ultimate Tragedy.

For it is Johnson's ambition that makes for the play's wild gaiety, and its ultimate tragedy. He wants to improve his people, by the standards of the British rulers. He includes himself as "we British," and like all colonials, chatters about going "home."

Exuberantly, he urges the people to build a road through the bush. His employer, the judge, has pointed out its advantages. And he has made the fatal mistake of conniving with Johnson to shift certain funds in their budget, to make the road possible.

Inevitably, Johnson makes his own cheerful little profits, and, when he loses his job, cannot resist throwing a lush jamboree for his friends. Debts plague him, and robbing a store, he kills a white man.

No Hanging.

In the end, the tragic childish figure begs his boss, whom he loves and trusts, to shoot him, rather than let him hang.

Hyman makes of this fabulous character a portrait which will plague your memory. He is fanciful and endless with resource as he paints the gay, life-loving, erratic and ambitious youngster.

When his heart is breaking, as it often does, the actor is so exposed, so revealing of emotions, one is almost embarrassed. It is a fabulous creation, from the point of view of writing, acting and directing.

Boldly Underlined.

One of the most important things Hyman does, too, is boldly underline the play's theme, without for a moment asking pity.

For "Mr. Johnson" is a sensitive comment on missionary or proselytizing practices, so common through all the world these days. Clearly, one cannot be too careful with the benediction of "advantages."

This is brought out with brilliant insight and humor in an exquisite scene between the two wives of the British officer and his native clerk. The lovely African girl is having a baby, but the white girl is afraid to. They speak in awkward monosyllables, but their hearts meet on common ground.

Beautifully Played.

The African girl is beautifully played by Josephine Premice. She is still and sharp, and has dignity and deep emotion.

Gaby Rodgers is remarkably original as the British visitor. Her flightiness is deftly ironical. She is inventive and incisive, never losing true sympathy for the character.

William Sylvester is wonderfully sturdy as the British officer. The near panic of his harrowing last few moments makes an unforgettable passage.

Journal American

March 30, 1956

A Real Hit? May Well Be

Earle Hyman Stars in African Type of 'Sergeants' Drama

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT APPEARS FROM here that "Mister Johnson," a new play by Robert Rosten, adapted from the novel by Joyce Cary, may well turn out to be one of the season's unheralded hits. In an odd way, this is a sort of African "No Time for Sergeants," with tragic overtones. There is an enormous performance by Earle Hyman in the title role, and there is some similarity in the concept of a lovable dolt caught up in a situation beyond his comprehension.

Here it is the story of a Nigerian lad whose frenzied enthusiasm for the advent of civilization in his small community leads to his eventual destruction. It is a not unfamiliar tale of his ingenuous acceptance of the white man and Christianity, of the humorous incongruities in the moral and legal concepts, and the inevitable cleavage in the two ideologies.

The play, at the Martin Beck Theatre, is wonderfully well paced, and the William and Jean Eckart sets—a series of highly mobile drops and sliding in-sets — maintain a constant sense of movement and dimension.

There is frequent and telling employment of native drums, and several numbers—the wedding ceremony, the symbolic dance suggesting the felling of trees—could survive on their own merits in a musical.

But the evening is almost entirely Hyman's. This giggling and beguiling young man takes you to his heart in the early moments and sustains your interest in his wild and well-intentioned machinations until the final curtain falls on his flattened figure.

He is given spectacular support by several fellow operatives. Josephine Premice, playing his native wife, gives a carefully conceived interpretation of the simple aboriginal confronted with the bewildering neo-civilian. There is a scene of enormous warmth and humor when she meets the wife of the District Commissioner, a fluttery Mayfair modern, played with extreme finesse by Gaby Rodgers.

Adds Humor

William Sylvester, as the white civil servant, conveys the appropriate authority and humor to his role, and there are other notable contributions by Rosetta Le Noire, Thayer David, Lawrence Fletcher, James E. Wall, John Akar and Ruth Attaway.

It seemed to me that Robert Lewis, who directed, kept the proceedings rolling with an exceptionally effortless hand. This is not an overpowering drama, and it has its static moments, but he has made it move with ingenuity.

The name of the place where all this happens is called, according to the program, Fada, Nigeria, British West Africa. Fada. I'm amazed they didn't change the name of the play to "Life with Fada."

In spite of that, it's an evening well spent with some very engaging people.

Daily Mirror

April 1, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Mister Johnson' Is Superbly Acted

• Earle Hyman magnificently tragic as a decent man lost between two worlds.

"Mister Johnson" is the saga of a simple soul who would do good to others, only to have them do evil to him in return. His intentions are of the best, his ambition is laudable, but his methods tend to perplex superiors willing to profit by his unorthodox ideas.

Mister Johnson is proud to be a clerk in the office of the adminstrator, town of Fada, Nigeria, British West Africa. He admires the white man's civilization, though he cannot always understand its ways. He has love and loyalty for his immediate boss and the Crown.

THEN HE FALLS IN LOVE with a bush girl. Her family fleeces him, with a callous disregard. He would marry her in a Christian ceremony, and have her dress in a manner befitting his station. He cannot fathom her preference for the native garb and customs.

When a road is necessary for the progress of his village, and funds have not been appropriated to build it, he suggests a plan of taking money from one account and transferring it to another.

Slightly illegal, but it makes sense and gets things done. He also turns a quick pound or two by charging fees for the use of the primitive highway, to pay for some of his extravagances.

WHEN HIS EMPLOYER gets into hot water for having adopted Johnson's unusual fiscal policy, the devoted underling is summarily fired. Heartbroken, he steals from a store to give a party in the jungle, and murders the proprietor in a drunken moment. He cannot understand why he must hang for a deed that he didn't intend.

He pleads, in a tremendously moving scene, that his idol shoot him. This, the sympathetic colonial servant does. And hates himself for having to show mercy in this fashion. Thus is the life of an innately snuffed out, because he merely wanted happiness for himself and others.

"Mister Johnson" was based by Norman Rosten on a novel by Joyce Cary. Though Roston has managed to transfer a fascinating character to the stage, he has been less than successful in creating a sufficiently dramatic background for him. He has sprawled his materials, and too seldom focused them toward cumulative effect.

HIS MISTER JOHNSON is reminiscent at times of the Sakini of "The Teahouse of the August Moon," the Pullman porter turned despot in "The Emperor Jones" and the amiable GI of "No Time for Sergeants." Yet he is never any of these. Rather is he the likable Mister Johnson, doomed to a tragic end through his inadequacy to cope with a culture foreign to him.

Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis have given the play a superlative production. Lewis, doubling as director, has, with the assistance of choreographer Pearl Primus and designers William and Jean Eckart, achieved stunning pictorial and emotional impact. Here is a masterpiece of stagecraft.

Earle Hyman is magnificent as the well-meaning, essentially honest and irresponsible native trapped between two ways if life. His dreams, accomplishments and eventual destruction are realized with touches that are irresistibly amusing and enormously disturbing. Take our word for it, Hyman is going to win many a prize this semester for a truly great performance.

WILLIAM SYLVESTER etches a fitting companion piece as the official who would do well by his trusting admirer, but has to sacrifice him for his misdeeds. Josephine Premice is excellent as the bush girl who weds Johnson through greed, and later shows him compassion.

Gaby Rodgers, a first-rate actress, is quite good as a giddy wife just out from England, excited by the strangeness of the dark continent and a bit irritated by its crudities. The always dependable Lawrence Fletcher, Thayer David and John Akar do justice to other roles.

That the Martin Beck's new tenant will have a wide appeal for those seeking pat entertainment, or the well-made play, is doubtful. But, for all its faults, it will prove rewarding for those willing to settle for superior characterization, fine acting and the exotic color of the African West Coast.

"Little Glass Clock"

The New York Times

March 27, 1956

Theatre: 'Glass Clock'

Comedy by Hugh Mills Opens at the Golden

By BROOKS ATKINSON

DULLNESS is breaking out with something approaching frenzy in the springtime theatre. Hugh Mills' "Little Glass Clock," which opened at the John Golden last evening, gives dullness the most imposing triumph of the season.

It is imposing because Cecil Beaton, the magnifico, has set it and dressed it with splendor. Given a script that is laid in France in the eighteenth century, and that is densely populated with kings, counts, marshalls, generals, cardinals and servants, Mr. Beaton has designed "Little Glass Clock" as though Marivaux had written it. Given the slender figure of Eva Gabor as a countess for his model, Mr. Beaton has designed a series of gowns that a queen might envy.

•

Mr. Mills has written a comedy that is consistent. Everything about it is unnerving. It is the story of a brilliant countess whom the Marechal Francois de Sèvres and His Majesty, Louis XV, try to seduce in sequence on her wedding night while her young husband, Le Comte de Montfort, no less, hovers anxiously on the edges of the play.

Since Mr. Mills has a ponderous sense of humor, his amorous fable remains as tasteless as it sounds. Nothing about Alan Schneider's direction is brighter, and nothing about the acting relieves the pall of tedium that envelops Mr. Mills' costume charade.

•

In addition to Miss Gabor, the cast includes Reginald Gardiner, Bramwell Fletcher, Douglas Watson, George Curzon and John McGiver, not to mention a smartly uniformed young man who is frequently drumming. Everybody on the stage is quizzically ironic about the wickedness he is fomenting. But "Little Glass Clock" is a gold-plated bore. If wickedness can be as dull as this, it is terrifying to imagine what virtue could be if the same author described it.

"LITTLE GLASS CLOCK"

Comedy by Hugh Mills; staged by Alan Schneider; set by Cecil Beaton; presented by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers in association with Julius Fleischmann at the John Golden Theatre, March 26, 1956. The cast:

Gisele.....Angela Thornton
Julien.....Donald Somers
Hyppolite.....Norman Barrs
Abbe Matignon..Reginald Gardiner
Armand.....Douglas Watson
A Lieutenant....Robert Carroll
Gabrielle.....Eva Gabor
A Drummer Boy....Fred Baker
A Soldier.....Theodore George
Marechal Francois de Sevres..
Bramwell Fletcher
General De Courcelles.....
John McGiver
Cardinal Pio di Amadori.....
Richard Longman
His Majesty Louis XV.....
George Curzon

Daily Mirror

March 27, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Little Glass Clock' Ticks Out No Hit

• Excellent cast headed by Eva Gabor is wasted in trivial charade at Golden.

Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers are shrewd showmen and gentlemen of discrimination. That they saw sufficient merit in Hugh Mills' "Little Glass Clock" to produce it baffles us. For the new tenant of the John Golden Theatre is an empty little charade with a hollow ring.

What it really amounts to is an old-fashioned French force, trapped out in period costumes and replete with flowery, though seldom very bright, dialogue. Being imitation Gallic, it not only features the eternal triangle, but complicates even that complication. Rather it is something of a quadrangle.

A HANDSOME lieutenant colonel in the French army marries a reigning beauty. This would be in the 18th Century, during the rule of Louis XV. Immediately he is promoted to general, and ordered to the battlefront by a designing rival. His clever wife devises a scheme to thwart this attempt on her integrity.

Then the King himself finds the young wife desirable. So he, too, puts in an appearance at her chateau. Needless to say, the resourceful lady again manages to outwit a suitor for her favors. The plot is ever so much more complex than this, but if you want to become enmeshed in its intricacies you'll have to buy a ticket to the Golden.

Seldom has such an excellent cast been wasted on such trivia. George Curzon brings high style to the role of the amorous monarch. Eva Gabor is lovely and graceful as the newlywed with too many admirers. Reginald Gardiner, Douglas Watson, Bramwell Fletcher and Robert Carroll approach their assignments with eminent rightness, while John McGiver and Richard Longman make quite a bit out of almost nothing.

• • •

ALAN SCHNEIDER has staged the trifle for more than it is worth, and Cecil Beaton has contributed handsome decor. The two Richards have been most generous with their joint bankroll in embellishing this innocuous confection.

"Little Glass Clock," however, has one virtue. It is brief. The running time is well under the average for Broadway. Though it may seem lengthy from an aisle seat, it really ticks off quickly in terms of the mechanical timepiece.

Journal American

March 27, 1956

Slow Pace Kills Comedy

British Import Brightly Mounted But Play Fails to Produce Laugh

By JOHN McCLAIN

THINGS WERE GOING too well; the season had produced more than its quota of successes; there was a certain eminence in many of the near-misses. Then, late in the year, along comes "Little Glass Clock" and we're all back in the bullrushes without a flashlight.

Several items regarding this play which opened at the John Golden Theatre last night seem to defy explanation. It has been staged in London and so Mssrs. Aldrich, Myers and Fleischmann, the producers, had presumably been in the position of buying a "live" and tried product.

What, one wonders, were the values that induced them to bring it here, and what happened to them en route? Was it casting, was it direction? It seems inconceivable that it was simply that old disparity between British and American audiences.

Sorry Evening

For the show, as it emerged last night, did not produce one laugh worthy of the name in the sorry evening. There are the glorious Louis XV costumes and a becoming set by Cecil Beaton, the players press on with assurance and apparent delight, but what they say to one another has the brilliance and bite of a ceaseless depilatory commercial. The whole thing goes over with the percussion of a dropped sponge.

A French officer has just married a beauteous bride and has brought her home for their honeymoon. This is the signal for her to be besieged by a series of ridiculous lechers: a prelate, a field marshal and, finally, the King himself. It takes an interminable time and no end of mistaken identity, loaded drinks, double entendre and the like, so that when the groom is alone with bride, at long last, one is seized with a sense of crashing ennui.

There is no record here of how the comedy was performed abroad, but it would seem to me that its only chance would be in going all-out for the broadest farce. This would of course require the services of a group of skilled zanies who could bring some hilarity to the otherwise somnolent script.

Seemed Stifled

No such group currently operates at the Golden. Eva Gabor is a dazzling and resplendent bride, breath-taking in her Beaton creations, but she is not a farceur nor a highly-skilled actress. Reginald Gardiner, quite a madman in his own right, seemed to be stifled somewhat by the surroundings; there was nothing particularly hilarious in the interpretations of Douglas Watson, Bramwell Fletcher, or the other conspirators.

A little glass clock, from which the play takes its name, stands on a table onstage striking the hours at intervals. One of the characters remarks to Miss Gabor that the clock is so much like her, "beautiful hands—lovely face—and a little bit fast." To me, as the evening wore on, it seemed singularly slow.

New York Post

March 27, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Costume Comedy With a Gabor

Let's take it for the purposes of argument that their worst enemies are right about the Gabor sisters. Even then, one of the girls wouldn't deserve to be trapped in a play as hopeless as "Little Glass Clock," which had a melancholy opening at the John Golden Theater last night. This is a costume comedy by one Hugh Mills, with an 18th-century French background, a Cecil Beaton set, and His Majesty, Louis XV, in the cast of characters, and it's indulging in understatement to report that dullness was rampant.

To get back to Eva Gabor, the member of the not unpublicized family embroiled in the proceedings at the John Golden, it would be going too far to say that she proved herself a romantic comedienne of any especial deftness, but she looked attractive, wore her period costumes becomingly, and gave every indication that she knew her way around on a professional stage. Anyway, she demonstrated that she was worthy of a better fate than "Little Glass Clock" thrust upon her.

Cold Comfort

The same cold comfort can be bestowed upon various other members of the cast. Reginald Gardiner, facing a tougher task than when he used to give comic impersonations of wallpaper, railroad trains and boat whistles, almost made something of the role of an abbe pretending to be a husband who pretended to be a military genius. George Curzon added a momentary touch of style in his brief appearance as Louis XV. And Richard Longman managed to look remarkably in period and character when he came on briefly as a cardinal.

But it was all such a waste of time and effort. An attenuated anecdote about the effort of various lecherous gentlemen, including the King, to get rid of a young French officer on the night of his marriage to Miss Gabor, "Little Glass Clock" didn't even manage to leer with any success. It was, in fact, notable only for the complete absence of anything in plot or dialogue containing any suggestion of wit, humor or ingenuity.

Drugged Wine

At one point in the narrative, it was the author's high invention to have the most amorous of the would-be seducers put to sleep with a drink of drugged wine. It isn't because I think I'm being any funnier than the playwright but only because "Little Glass Clock" makes such an idea inevitable that I suggest the same effect could have been achieved by forcing the fellow to listen to a bit more of the comedy's dialogue.

In addition to the players already mentioned, such competent actors as Douglas Watson, who is the frustrated young husband; Bramwell Fletcher, who is the drugged lecher, and Robert Carroll, who is a stern lieutenant, strive manfully, while John McGiver emerges briefly as a very British French officer. The title, by the way, seems to arise from the presence on the stage of, oddly enough, a little glass clock. Even a Gabor should be protected from Mr. Mills' comedy.

New York Herald Tribune

March 27, 1956

THEATER

'Little Glass Clock'

By WALTER F. KERR

WITH the help of some doctored wine, two of the actors in "Little Glass Clock" were put soundly to sleep in the middle of the second act Monday night. Lucky dogs.

I'm more the wide-awake type myself, and I kept seeing cloaks being whipped on and off, bedroom doors being whipped open and shut and Eva Gabor fighting strenuously for her virtue for a good two and one-half hours. Sex—in the improper hands—can be pretty terrifying.

* * *

Author Hugh Mills has aimed, with grisly determination, at the sort of glittering boudoir comedy in which a newlywed beauty (Miss Gabor) discovers that she is in great last-minute demand. Before her soldier husband (Douglas Watson in knee-boots) can escort her to the Cecil Beaton eighteenth-century bed that bides its time at upstage center, a wily rake (Bramwell Fletcher) has him conveniently packed off to the wars. The rake at the Golden is, however, swiftly replaced by a slightly lascivious clergyman, the clergyman at the Golden is as swiftly replaced by the lecherous King of France, and the play at the Golden will no doubt be replaced with a swiftness that would dazzle them all.

Mr. Mills is working in a manner to which he is clearly unaccustomed. The first billowing skirt had barely careened onto the stage last evening when a dull, booming echo began to bounce off the epigrams. There were, it is true, a few titters from out front as a red-heeled Abbe (Reginald Gardiner arching his eyebrows in vain) made mildly caustic comments about the matrimonial state. Well, they were more like whimpers. But with the following exchange, the audience flatly served notice that it was through trying:

"I can't stay here. The house is haunted."

"Surely you don't believe in ghosts."

"Your mother did. She wouldn't stay here."

"That wasn't to avoid ghosts. That was to avoid my father."

I don't know why the customers choose this relatively inoffensive jape — much more laborious things were to follow—as the signal for one of the most profound stubborn hushes I have ever heard in a playhouse, but choose it they did. After that no sort of merriment seemed possible. A man sat right down on his spurs, and nobody laughed. One fellow tried unsuccessfully to break his sword over his knee, another delivered a warlike ode and then flashed out his saber to disclose a broken hilt. A Cardinal strolled in sniffing a red rose, a lady stole a pair of drumsticks from an innocent drummer and wouldn't give them back, a great parade of household utensils ended in a chamber-pot held high in the air. No response. The audience, that intuitive genius, must have sensed that all these things were coming.

Alan Schneider has directed the hollow artifice with what seems to be confidence and is very often grace. Cecil Beaton's scenic bandbox is a lather of crystal, cherubs, and loud red plush, perfectly attractive so long as no one is standing in front of it. There is even one costume (white, with doodads) for Miss Gabor that encourages a flutter of applause.

Of the players, I thought George Curzon, as a bewigged and bristling Louis XV, came off best, mostly because he spoke with a fairly weary contempt. Miss Gabor holds her handsome chin splendidly high, looks fetching, and speaks the lines with an unfortunate clarity. I confess to snickering twice at Reginald Gardiner, once when he fleetingly imagined himself as Joan of Arc and once when he begged piteously for food, and I hold nothing against him. Douglas Watson's hearty hero is inexplicably assured, Bramwell Fletcher leers a lot as a conniving military commander, and John McGiver looks for his mislaid cavalry with a believable bewilderment.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 27, 1956

'Little Glass Clock' At the John Golden

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

What with the exquisite Eva Gabor, and the splendor of Cecil Beaton's setting, "The Little Glass Clock" has all the appearance of an enchanted evening.

The play, which opened last night at the John Golden, even has some valiant attempts at comedy on the part of the gentlemen in the company.

Then the whole thing turns out to be fine binding for a dull book. The play is one of those sexy complications at which Molnar used to excel.

Not Much Wit.

The trouble with the current example is that it is all but devoid of wit. The situations are there, obvious though they are.

But the lines are colorless. Instead of being sprightly or provocative, they are heavy handed with leering lechery.

Miss Gabor is quite legendary in her white wigs and flowing pastel gowns. The play occurs on the night of her wedding to a French comte, who is immediately promoted to general and ordered off to war, by his superiors, who would supersede him as groom.

Douglas Watson, as her husband, dresses up as the abbe. And Reginald Gardiner as the abbe, puts on the husband's uniform and takes command of the army.

Sleeping Medicine.

Bramwell Fletcher is a conniving marechal, defeated in his wooing by some sleeping medicine.

Toward the end, the King of France, imposingly played by George Curzon, almost wins the maiden, when the false husband is brought home with minor wounds.

Clearly this is a chain of trumped up farcical complications which could be excusable only as a line on which to hang sharp, clever dialogue.

There is hardly a laugh in the script, although Gardiner comes remarkably close to reminding you that it is a comedy with his elaborately careful delivery.

Infinitely Graceful.

Eva Gabor is infinitely graceful as the alluring comtesse. If nothing else about the play is believable, one is certainly convinced that gentlemen of all ranks would pursue her.

Watson does an extremely consistent, good-natured job as the husband, a role he assumed only a week ago. Bramwell Fletcher has an elegant and demonic air as the marechal.

At best, it is a hollow little exercise. The production nowhere is inventive enough with comic ideas to overcome the triteness of the script.

DAILY NEWS

March 27, 1956

'Little Glass Clock' Strikes Out Making Minutes Much Too Long

By JOHN CHAPMAN

To Victor Borge, Southbury, Conn.: Dear Victor: Please stop sitting on pheasant eggs at your fowl hatchery and return at once to the John Golden Theatre, W. 45th St., N. Y. All by yourself you filled the Golden every evening for nearly three years, but since you left nobody has laid anything but eggs there. The biggest egg was the one which was deposited last night, called "Little Glass Clock." Phew!

This, dear Victor, is what is called a period piece. Period. The time is the 18th Century and the location is a chateau in France. (A beautiful chateau, too, designed by Cecil Beaton.) Into this chateau, for no reason or another, come such bewigged and overdressed characters (costumes supervised by Beaton) as Reginald Gardiner, Douglas Watson, Bramwell Fletcher and George Curzon. They all wear long, black wading boots, like the Sewer Man in "The Madwoman of Chaillot."

There's a Lady Present

The reason the bewigged and overdressed characters come to this chateau is a simple, biological one. There is a female there. She is no less than Gabrielle, Comtesse de Montfort, and is played by no more than Eva Gabor. (There couldn't be more than Eva Gabor. This girl just doesn't have it, she has them.)

Victor, old boy, I know you are warming a new setting of oeufs and can't get up just now to see "The Little Glass Clock," so I will brief you briefly with excerpts from the dialog written by Hugh Mills. Ready? Sit tight and let's go:

Lines From the Play

"Monsieur de Montfort is about to arrive from Paris."

"It reminds me of a certain charming and cultivated woman."

"Will you take a glass of wine?"

"Madame de Montfort has gone to Chambord to see the King." (The real Chambord, Victor, in France—not the branch on Third Ave.)

"Whom have we to thank for all these horses?" So help me, Borge, this is a line from the play. It is delivered by Miss Gabor when she appears in a new dress—a beautiful blue one this time. She still has a black beauty patch on her left cheek, but the black beauty patch that was on her right bosom must have been scraped off while she was changing from the white dress.

Borge—Help!

The play is funny, Victor, but I don't think it will have the run you had because it doesn't think it is funny. It seems to be a serious attempt to be a combination of Booth Tarkington's "Monsieur Beaucaire" and Whatchamacallit's "Grandma's Diary." I just don't know what possessed Richard Aldrich, Richard Myers and Julius Fleischmann to produce it, and if Alan Schneider really directed it I didn't notice.

Come on back where you belong, Borge. Anybody can raise a pheasant, a guinea hen . . . or a turkey.

"Mr. Wonderful"

Daily Mirror

March 23, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Mr. Wonderful' Is A Mediocre Musical

• Sammy Davis, Jr. goes all-out but is held back by dull drama.

"Mr. Wonderful" spells a terrific trouper in a mediocre musical. Sammy Davis, Jr. is a great performer. He can sing, step and do impersonations with the tops. And he has the spark. All he needs, in the Broadway Theatre's new tenant, is material worthy of his gifts.

It's difficult to believe that Joseph Stein and Will Glickman, who gave us the libretto of the captivating "Plain and Fancy," should have come up with such a shoddy and tasteless book as this one. They've gone back to the oldie about the no-talent thespian who tosses away his own act, and swipes the family bankroll, to promote a comer who has what it takes, but takes a long time getting confidence in himself.

• • •

JERRY BOCK, Larry Holofcener and George Weiss have equipped the song-and-dancer with a pedestrian score. Jule Styne, an ace ASCAPer, would have done well to lend the boys a hand. Instead, he has chosen to team with George Gilbert and Lester Osterman, Jr., in producing the Davis vehicle.

Sammy is a star because he always goes all-out for the customers. In this instance, he adds something special to atone for the lapses of the scripters. With his dad and Uncle Will Mastin, he really explodes the fireworks. He's a scintillating luminary in a dullish dilemma.

Jack Carter is nothing less than dynamic as the small-timer pretending to push Sammy into the big-time spotlight. He took gags that were venerable when the Proctor Circuit passed from the scene, and succeeded in conveying the impression that they were still pretty funny. Pat Marshall, a Titian bombshell, is a standout as his long-suffering spouse.

Olga James, who has looks and an excellent voice, lends Sammy a hand with the romantic interludes. Chita Rivera, a real cute chick, clicks with her rolling eyes and sinuous hips. Hal Loman contributes exciting hoofing, while Malcolm Lee Beggs and T. J. Halligan get a lot of mileage on little gas.

• • •

OLIVER SMITH AND Robert Mackintosh have designed appropriately garish sets and costumes for the brash buffonery. Jack Donohue has staged the charade at such a frantic pace as to thwart attempts at criticism.

"Mr. Wonderful" kept reminding us of how really wonderful even "Ankles Aweigh" was by comparison. But that's just one opinion. It should be reported that the initial audience, composed of pages from the Who's Who of Show Business, whistled, cheered and blistered its palms in uproarious aprpoval.

The first-nighters, hep as they come, taxed the Broadway's rafters with their thunderous laughter and applause. Their enthusiasm tallied as a resounding vote in favor of the new arrival. So it won't matter to Styne, Gilbert and Osterman if your aisle-sitter regretfully turns thumbs down.

Anyway, our hat is off to Sammy Davis, Jr. and his inspired associates. They put a punch in the proceedings when their authors and composers let them down.

"MR. WONDERFUL"

Musical comedy with book by Joseph Stein and Will Glickman; music and lyrics by Jerry Bock; Larry Holofcener and George Weiss; scenery by Oliver Smith; costumes by Robert Mackintosh; staged by Jack Donohue; presented by Jule Styne and George Gilbert in association with Lester Osterman Jr. at the Broadway Theatre, March 22, 1956. The cast:

Unemployed Actress..Ann Buckles
Hal.....Hal Loman
Song Plugger....Richard Curry
Soprano.....Rina Falcone
Rita Romano.....Chita Rivera
Two Comics....Bob Leslie and Larry B. Leslie
Audition Annie.....Pat Wilkes
Johnnie.....John Pelletti
Acrobat.....Dorothy D'Honau
Talent Scout.....T. J. Halligan
Annie's Friend..Charlotte Foley
Fred Campbell....Jack Carter
Lil Campbell.....Pat Marshall
Counterman.....Herb Fields
Mr. Foster..Malcolm Lee Beggs
Uncle.....Will Mastin
Dad.....Sammy Davis Sr.
Charlie Welch..Sammy Davis Jr.
Ethel Pearson.....Olga James
Stage Manager.....Bob Kole
Script Girl.....Ginny Perlowin
Cigarette Girl.....Jerri Gray
Little Girl.....Marilyn Cooper
Sophie's Boy.....Ronnie Lee

DAILY NEWS

March 23, 1956

'Mr. Wonderful' Bold and Brassy Fun Starring Sammy Davis Jr.

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Last night's new muscial at the Broadway Theatre, "Mr. Wonderful," is a brassy hymn to all the brassy people of Union City, N. J., Broadway, N. Y., and Miami Beach, Fla.—and it was vastly appreciated by an audience whose likes I have not encountered at premieres since the Monday matinees at the Palace Theatre in 1928 and 1929.

It also was quite considerably appreciated by me when I could hear it. Without question, "Mr. Wonderful" is the loudest show ever to be presented in a New York playhouse. The management has got the theatre's stage miked up to within a fraction of an inch of chaos, and the loudspeakers would drive a hi-fi addict right back to old Mr. Edison's wax cylinders. If your hearing is normal, the best way to attend "Mr. Wonderful" would be to bring two hearing aids, plug one in each ear and turn everything off.

Small-Timers

"Mr. Wonderful" is a story about small-time show people—in the main, a young fellow who is content to do his routines in a Union City dump and another young fellow who aspires to be his manager and lead him on to big-time success.

The first of these two is played by Sammy Davis Jr. Davis does just about everything—acts, sings, dances, does imitations—and everything he does is right. In the midst of a really dreadful plot he manages, in addition to displaying his spectacularly varied talents, to act a role with complete sincerity. I'm for Davis.

Even more, I am for Jack Carter, the young man who wants to become the manager. Carter is as loud, as innocent and as slow-witted as any practitioner of tank-town show business could possibly be, and he is delightful. A dance number that he and Davis manage to scramble together is a fine, satirical comment on the kind of show biz he and Davis are supposed to be following.

Sprightly Staging

Another favorite of mine in "Mr. Wonderful" is Pat Marshall, who, as Carter's wife, fits beautifully into this exposure of shoddy theatricals.

The plot of this show needn't bother anybody now, because it couldn't have bothered its authors, Joseph Stein and Will Glickman. But the manner in which it has been staged by Jack Donohue, set by Oliver Smith and costumed by Robert Mackintosh, is sprightly.

The music seems to be good but obvious, and is very well orchestrated and played." Mr. Wonderful" never pretends to be anything except what it is, a noisy and lively show built around an entertainer who has great versatility and a charming personality. I liked it and you might, too. But don't forget to bring two hearing aids.

The New York Times
March 23, 1956

Theatre: 'Mr. Wonderful'

Sammy Davis Jr. Stars in New Musical

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN the last scene of "Mr. Wonderful," which opened at the Broadway last evening, Sammy Davis Jr., his father and uncle find themselves performing in a nightclub set.

Presumably, this is where they came in before the writers, composers, directors, actors, agents, arrangers, musicians, scene - designers, costume seamstresses and electricians got to work on their Broadway show. Mr. Davis is a talented and winning young man; his father and uncle quite properly think a lot of him. But the whole idea of "Mr. Wonderful" is redundant. Mr. Davis does not require all this labor and industry to get where he has already been.

•

By putting their heads thoughtfully together, the fabricators of "Mr. Wonderful" open their show with an explosion of mediocrity. "1617 Broadway" is the title of the song. The orchestra lets go with a terrific blast, the drummer being especially ecstatic. Rushing joyfully around the stage the performers scream the lyrics. The opening number is also livened up with some snappy gags about show business. Everybody is gay. Everybody is excited. Everybody is corny.

From that moment, "Mr. Wonderful" traces the career of a modest though gifted night-club performer who reluctantly allows himself to make the Big Time by playing the fabulous Palm Club in Miami. "The Palm Club can make you or break you," is the terrifying slogan. Is Sammy Davis Jr. victorious? Yes. Will success spoil Sammy Davis Jr? No.

•

The night club fable in "Guys and Dolls" was both funny and charming. For "Guys and Dolls" had a point of view. Although it regarded the Hot Spot as the essence of banality, it treated the girls and the dance routines with affection. But "Mr. Wonderful" has no point of view aside from a conviction that night clubs and show business are glamorous—an attitude open to considerable argument on the basis of most of the entertainment provided by the authors and composers.

In this column's opinion, "Mr. Wonderful" is amusing only when it takes leave of show business for a commercial interlude in Miami. A couple of hams who have goofed in a night club open a souvenir stand in the city of sand and sun. "Mr. Wonderful" has a point of view about that, and sardonic enough to be funny.

•

Otherwise, this is a spectacular, noisy endorsement of mediocrity that comes alive only when young Mr. Davis rocks and rolls, tap-dances or does imitations. There are some fugitive touches of the Harry Richman brand of dramaturgy in "Mr. Wonderful." It also discloses nostalgia for "Ankles Aweigh."

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 23, 1956

THEATER

'Mr. Wonderful'

By WALTER F. KERR

I THINK there may be a certain wisdom in letting the public discover a star for itself, rather than simply announcing one and throwing open the box-office windows. Sammy Davis jr., star of the extended new night-club act at the Broadway, does, of course, have a fabulous following in the nitery rock 'n 'roll set. But he is brand new to Broadway and he is—talent or no talent—hard put to live up to the particular hoorah the authors of "Mr. Wonderful" have created for him.

• • •

There's the title, to begin with. Mr. Davis has to batter his pork-pie hat pretty feverishly to be as wonderful as the marquee promises before the curtain has ever gone up. And when it has gone up, librettists Joseph Stein and Will Glickman batter him with the celebrity treatment in two further ways. One of them is the "he's-great-but-make-'em-wait" dodge.

For a solid act and a half Mr. Davis is pictured as a world-beater who just doesn't want to beat the world. Hiding his light under a New Jersey bushel, he resists every effort to push him into the big-time. The high-pressure boys are after him, but he shyly says no. His girl is after him, but he still says no. No matter how helplessly his backers founder around him, he keeps right on ducking those pay-dirt auditions, and what may have been meant as a display of modest diffidence becomes—in effect—an intolerably delayed "come-on."

• • •

All this time, mind you, composers Jerry Bock, Larry Holofcener and George Weiss are presumably whetting your appetite by announcing in song after song that the guy is just great. In addition to the title tune, which means just what it says, there's a salute to him by his character name ("The guy you can't squelch—Charlie Welch!"), an elaborate reprise of the same number ("Remember Eddie Foy and Eva Tanguay? Well, I say gangway!"), and, eventually, a reprise of one of the show's principal ballads in which a huckstering vaudevillian emotionally explains to the entertainer "Without You, I'm Nothing."

It would take Foy, Tanguay, Jolson and old Joe Jefferson to survive all this preparatory adulation, and Mr. Davis is only Mr. Davis. In itself, that's fine. Whatever this slight, lithe, sleek and everlastingly restless member of the Will Mastin Trio does is dynamically done. He juts his lower lip clear across the orchestra pit, closes his eyes in a passionate wail, flashes a gigantic ring on his very flexible fingers, and struts, leaps, taps, shuffles and howls with mercurial abandon.

When he stops singing, he blasts into a trumpet. When he throws the trumpet away, he joins his father and his uncle in doing spectacular damage to the Broadway stage floor. When his feet give out, he does impersonations—very good impersonations—of Nat King Cole, Vaughn Monroe, Jimmy Cagney, Jerry Lewis and quite a few other cafe movie familiars. But, allowing for the skill that goes into a ten-thirty jamboree on a night-club floor, "Mr. Wonderful" is itself only an impersonation—an impersonation of a musical comedy.

• • •

Oliver Smith has designed the necessary settings—lunch-counters, newsstands, joints with jukeboxes that change colors, Miami motels—but they are only necessary as polite window-dressing; any other sets might have done. Robert Macintosh's costumes run to the standard stripes and checks; any other costumes might have done better. Jack Donohue's staging zips along at a professional clip; but you keep feeling it yearning for some place to go

• • •

Jack Carter and Pat Marshall play a couple of down-and-out vaudevillians who don't care whether they ever work again so long as their hero becomes a headliner, and they are breezy, personable, accomplished. The jokes wished on them tend to the "Two coffees, please," "I'll have two, also," school of sidewalk double-talk, but Miss Marshall is pretty and Mr. Carter is unfailingly vigorous. Chita Rivera is hopelessly stranded with some baby-doll mannerisms that are merely alarming—though she dances a dizzying improvisation with Hal Loman that brightens up the first-act finale—and Olga James joins Mr. Davis pleasantly in what is probably the show's most fetching tune, a languid and hummable ballad called "Ethel, Baby."

It strikes me, too, that the star has been shortchanged musically. An oldie, "Sing You Sinners," is rushed into the breach for a first-act show-stopper, and the big splash in the second act is a medley of standard stuff. But more than that, Mr. Davis is at his easiest and most ingratiating with that relatively quiet "Ethel, Baby," yet he is almost never again given a chance to relax gracefully and just sing. The pressure is on this boy, and he might have been better off if they'd just let him sneak in.

New York Post

March 23, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

An Evening With Sammy Davis Jr.

It is entirely possible that this reviewer was the only person in last night's audience at the Broadway Theater, where the new musical show modestly called "Mr. Wonderful" was having its first local presentation, who had never before seen Sammy Davis Jr. The report of this newcomer to the popular young man's art is that there is no doubt he is an unusually talented and versatile performer, with a notable gift for assured showmanship, but it is a little premature at this point in his career to expect him to carry on his shoulders so onerous a burden.

Not that young Mr. Davis is completely alone in "Mr. Wonderful." There is Jack Carter, a brisk and alert comedian, to give vitality to the role of chief clown. There are Pat Marshall, who is a bouncy and dynamic soubrette, and Chita Rivera, a pert and humorous dancing comedienne, and Olga James, a nice ingenue who sings the attractive title song pleasantly. But the evening is chiefly Sammy Davis Jr., an indefatigable entertainer, who sings and dances and plays musical instruments and goes in for expert mimicry and still finds time to carry on what the show has of a plot.

Night Club Act

In fact, in the second act "Mr. Wonderful" gives up all pretense of being a book show and enters its proper field, which is that of the night club. From then on, Mr. Davis takes over completely, with some moral support from Sammy Davis Sr. and Will Mastin, and gives a repertory of his numbers. These include impersonations of various popular night club singers, most of whom are probably better known to you than they are to me, and singing a lot of celebrated show tunes, including "The Birth of the Blues." This, I take it, is what the audience has been waiting for all evening, and the star certainly doesn't fail it in expertness or quantity.

It is hardly a surprise, by the way, when the plot of "Mr. Wonderful" does fade into thin air, because it has been threatening to do so from the beginning, despite Mr. Carter's gallant exuberance. The story is something about a youthful performer of much skill, who is so shy and modest that he doesn't want to leave his little club in Union City to try for the famous Palm Club in New York. The suspense is that his admirers have difficulty persuading him to show up for an audition.

Songs and Comedy

There are, I think, some pleasant songs in the score, including that title number and a bright quartet number called "I've Been Too Busy." There is also some comedy, and I don't believe I'm being unfair to say it is characterized by the dialogue in which one character says "I've been thinking" and the other replies, "You can get very sick that way." An occasional attempt is made to satirize Miami tourists and the business of talent agents, but you have to go back to the unconquerable Mr. Carter for the few times humor raises its slightly battered head.

In the end, it is made clear that "Mr. Wonderful" is essentially a night club show transferred to a theater, and I'm not sure that the theater is the ideal place for this type of entertainment. The intention was also to demonstrate that Mr. Davis is an expert performer, and I think the new musical comedy proves its point here. He unquestionably is. But a book show, even a disappearing one, demands a bit of acting, too, and in this he is less happy. I'll gladly concede that the young man is a good showman, but not that "Mr. Wonderful" makes for a stimulating theater evening.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 23, 1956

'Mr. Wonderful' Not So Wonderful

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The star of "Mr. Wonderful" lives up to his title role in this new musical at the Broadway.

Sammy Davis Jr. is a diminutive powerhouse, who works with tremendous energy. He has warmth and charm as well as talent.

He could unquestionably be a big revue star in the theater, which is no surprise to night club fans, who have known him as a reigning headliner for some time. And, there is every reason to believe he could be convincing and effective starring in a book show.

No Distinction.

But "Mr. Wonderful" is a one-way bargain. It is loud and fast and energetic. It certainly has no distinction or originality other than the quality brought it by the star.

It is a disjointed entertainment. The plotless book purports to present Davis as a bright young entertainer, afraid of his chance at the big time. When it suits the men behind the scenes, for no reason whatsoever, he changes his mind.

Then we are treated to Davis' regular night club act. This serves to point up even more drastically how ordinary the show itself has been, particularly with the introduction of well known songs by such top hands as Gershwin and Porter.

Eager Aplomb.

At this point, Davis does his imitations, including Ed Sullivan, as well as the usual celluloid subjects. He sings and dances, and plays the drums with eager aplomb.

It is a good act, which seems superimposed on the pointless book. And, in the end, Sammy is left closing the show with the one number the production has provided him, the same "Jacques d'Iraq" with which he started off the evening.

Davis has been in the show world all his life. He has more than training and experience.

Lovable Assertiveness.

There is a distinct quality about his work, a direct communication and a lovable assertiveness, that makes this dynamic little cricket a star. No lesser description will do.

The company around him is agreeable and talented, but not often to the degree that it can rise above the ordinary goings on in which it is asked to partake.

Jack Carter is willing as always to take the world on his shoulders, in an effort to make everything seem cheery. Occasionally with anxious buffoonery, he can.

TV Convention.

Pat Marshall makes him a buxom, clear singing wife. Their roles are written in that TV convention which considers it beneath contempt for a married couple to exchange a civil word.

Olga James is an attractive soprano as love interest for the star. And Chita Rivera makes a strong impression with her dancing and her wide-eyed nonsense.

"Without You" has a nice lilt, and "Too Close for Comfort" and "I've Been Too Busy" seem cute and singable. Of course, the title song has already made an indelible impression, and it will continue to do the same.